

Month day year critical analysis

Business



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The sermon that runs through “ A Good Man Is Hard to Find” begins before the first words of the story have been read. Apparently, beginning at the beginning wasn’t enough for Flannery O’Connor, for by the time this story starts, the first foreshadowing of doom is already in full-swing—whether the audience knows it or not. If, as the title states, a good man is hard to find, then by default, the men one generally encounters must not be good, and as the story progresses, readers become increasingly aware of how true this is. The focus of O’Connor’s sermon: the struggle of man as he attempts to recover from the Fall as demonstrated by a small group of characters who battle to overcome the nature of Original Sin.

“ A Good Man Is Hard to Find” is an examination of the grace with which this may or may not be accomplished, and it could be no other way, for woven tightly within the chronicling of this small group of characters is an examination of the plight of all mankind—a plight that demands bad things will happen in O’Connor’s tale. Like the rising emotion of a Southern bible-thumping sermon, “ A Good Man Is Hard to Find” builds slowly. We join a family gathered around a table as they prepare for a trip to Florida. Much like a trip to church, not everyone involved is keen on the idea, and we are exposed to the dysfunction in the room: “ The grandmother did not want to go to Florida [. .

.] and she was seizing every opportunity to change Bailey’s mind” (O’Connor 1082). Having failed in her attempts with her son, she turns to her daughter-in-law, and then to her grandchildren in hopes that someone, anyone will lend credence to her rebellion. Like a preacher sensing disinterest, she ups

the stakes: “ this fellow who calls himself The Misfit is aloose from the Federal Pen and headed toward Florida [.]. .

.]lead here what it says he did to those people. [.]. . .] wouldn’t take my children in any direction with a criminal like that aloose in it” (1082).

The implication here is that the path to Florida is dangerous, and no good parent would dare expose his children to evil such as that described in the newspaper. The Fall, the origin of Original Sin, began with the warning by God to Adam and Eve that they not eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden, and in similar fashion, the grandmother has warned her flock that facing the serpent can come to no good (Gen. 2-3). Unlike God’s admonitions to Adam and Eve, the grandmother’s reasons are not altruistic: she wants to go to Tennessee not Florida, and she will twist every possible fact that she might to get her wish. O’Connor ups the doom ante over the next few paragraphs with the repetitive foreshadowing of potential danger. The grandmother hides her cat in the car because “ she was afraid he might brush against one of the gas burners and accidentally asphyxiate himself” (1083).

She does this knowing that Bailey would not approve; however, imperfect human that she is, she has little difficulty placing her needs ahead of the others with whom she will share the car. Her attire is also chosen with great care so that “ in case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady” (1083). As the story continues to unfold, it becomes more and more apparent that the grandmother has been assigned the representative role of Eve: ignoring the rules in lieu of her

personal needs, rationalizing her choices, and leading others astray. This is not new ground for O'Connor whose writing has often been characterized as exhibiting “ a preoccupation with the spiritual condition of modern man” (Browning). The critic Robert Drake said of Flannery O'Connor's work that “ her vision of man in this world was uncompromisingly Christian: [t[that]he saw all of life in Christian terms [.]

. . . and]he was not trying to ‘ sell’ Christianity; she was—as [.] . . .]ny writer is —trying to ‘ sell’ her particular perception of life in this world” (Drake 183).

The “ spiritual condition of modern man” is synonymous with Original Sin, and by the third page of the story, O'Connor raises her preacher's fist and reveals the truth that all mankind must face: death. As the six family members travel through Georgia, she points out a plantation graveyard “ with five or six graves” (O'Connor 1084). The family might be headed for Florida for the moment, but no matter what direction they travel or how many trips they take, the final stop for each will be death, and the way they pass their time (literally and figuratively) will determine whether death leads to Heaven or to Hell. The brief stop at Red Sammy's Famous Barbecue includes the grandmother's tossing around of the term “ good man” with Red Sammy himself. This is a benign example of what Preston Browning Jr. refers to as “‘ spiritual crime’—crime whose ultimate motive is a desperate desire to affirm a basis for human existence which transcends the waywardness and willfulness of the individual human self” (Browning).

In Red Sammy, the grandmother finds an ally with whom to affirm herself: a stranger with whom she can commiserate about people in general who “ are

certainly not nice like they used to be,” and who also understands that “everything is getting terrible” (1085). Reading this passage, it is difficult to dismiss the aura that surrounds the tête-à-tête in Red Sammy’s: these two are engaged in an oft practiced habit of the somewhat religious—the art of exaggerating their devotion. The grandmother and Red Sammy know nothing of one another but what they have observed in a few short moments. In fact, the grandmother has witnessed Red Sammy snap at his wife, “[telling her]o quit lounging on the counter and [to]urry up with these people’s order,” yet moments later, she declares “you’re a good man!” (1085). Once the family leaves Red Sammy’s, the crescendo of the sermon builds: the grandmother succeeds in leading her family astray convincing them they absolutely must pause to visit a house from her childhood. The doom is again foreshadowed: the grandmother’s recollection of the house includes “six white columns”—yet another grave marker reference (1086).

Additionally, the way to the house is “a dirt road [. . . along which]he car race[s]roughly [through]udden washes [. . .

.]nd sharp curves on dangerous embankments” (1087). This is so obviously a group of souls who have wandered astray that it is brilliant in its overstatement. The same grandmother who used The Misfit’s last known location as an attempt to deter her family from their trip to Florida has no qualms about badgering them into taking an off-the-beaten-path dirt road that isn’t safe for travel. The group’s wandering astray ends as it must: with an accident followed quickly by tragedy—they have reached the end of their journey and run head-long into judgment day.

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Upended in a ditch, the disheveled family is confronted by The Misfit and his cohorts, and again, it is the grandmother who seals the fate of the whole family. The grandmother had the peculiar feeling that the bespectacled man was someone she knew [. . . .

] “You’re The Misfit,” she said. [. . . .] “Yes’m [. . . .

.]ut it would have been better for all of you [. . . .]f you hadn’t of reckernized me.

‘ (1089)The sermon has reached a fever pitch, and the grandmother’s opportunity to convert from sinner to saint has begun (Brewer 105). Just as the grandmother is representative of the Eve icon of Christian religion, and her family personifies Adam, The Misfit is iconographic as well, but he is not a stand-in for the devil; he is a stand-in for Jesus Christ. Like Christ, he cannot match his punishment with his crimes, and it is a rather shocking revelation when the reader learns that the name “ Misfit” isn’t a reference to the man’s inability to fit into society, but a result of the man’s self-reflection that “[h[he calls]imself The Misfit [. . . .

]ecause [h[he]an’t make all what [h[he]one wrong fit what all [h[he]one through in punishment” (1092). Flannery O’Connor once remarked about her writing that “ violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them for their moment of grace” (qtd. in Katz 55). In “ A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” The Misfit and his cohorts provide the grandmother with her opportunity, and at the beginning, she does not fare well. Once overcome by the criminals, the grandmother begins a dialogue with The Misfit and asks rhetorically “ You wouldn’t shoot a lady, would

you?” She has no thoughts but for herself, and as the terrifying truth of the family’s circumstance creeps from the edges towards the center of her consciousness, she acts as she did at the story’s beginning: grasping at anything to plead her case—but only her case.

She falsely praises The Misfit with “ I know you’re a good man. You don’t look a bit like you have common blood” (1089). Meanwhile, The Misfit orders his co-criminals to execute her family in small groups. The grandmother’s actions here are an example of what Claire Katz refers to as the impulse [of O’Connor’s characters] toward secular autonomy, the smug confidence that human nature is perfectible by its own efforts, that [O’Connor] sets out to destroy, through an act of violence so intense that the character is rendered helpless [. . .

] fiction in which a character attempts to live autonomously, to define himself and his values, only to be jarred back to what [O’Connor] calls ‘ reality’ [. . .] the need for absolute submission to the power of Christ.

(55) From the very beginning of the story, the grandmother has set herself apart from her family and from most of the world.

She is the one with the best ideas. She is the one who is a lady. She alone knows a “ good” man when she sees one. She is a real Christian. Therefore, it is she who should be saved.

To drive home her point—proving her autonomy and confidence—the grandmother dishes out advice to The Misfit—again, as her family is being slowly and methodically executed in the nearby woods. She assures him that “[h[he]ould be honest too if [h[he’d]nly try” and that “ if [h[he]ould

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pray, [. . .] Jesus would help [him] (1091). The Misfit does not need help, and it is this fact that will “freeze the [grandmother]’s moment of spiritual truth” (Coulthard 55).

The Misfit explains to the grandmother how “Jesus thrown everything off balance.” Then, he delivers the psychological blow that renders the grandmother helpless: “It was the same case with Him as with me except He hadn’t committed any crime and they could prove I had committed one” (1091). He follows this up with a pointed question to her: “does it seem right to you [. . .

]that one is punished a heap and another ain’t punished at all?” (1092). The Misfit is presenting the grandmother with an alternate truth: that Jesus accepted the injustices leveled against Him and accepted the evil acts of man against Him on some silly whim of God’s that He die for the sins of all mankind—sins which started in God’s own Garden of Eden. This new interpretation has a certain echo of truth to it, for it’s based on the same skewed logic he has seen in the prison system where he swears he has been the victim of punishment not fitting crime. Flannery O’Connor’s Jesus icon, The Misfit, has been allowed foresight, and instead of simply accepting the undue punishment, he has begun to protect himself. Of course, this is all playing out for the sake of the grandmother’s moment of spiritual truth, and what she does with The Misfit’s revelations will determine her ultimate fate: “I know you wouldn’t shoot a lady!”